

LIVING THE EXAMINED LIFE

Examining Our Life Purpose Are You Living Your Life on Purpose or By Accident?

In this lesson you will come to appreciate why you need to identify and then live your life with a divine purpose, and not allow yourself to be caught up in simply following the drift of our materialistic and secular culture.

In life, we can choose to live our lives one of two ways: we can either live our lives *on purpose*, or we can live our lives *by accident*. In other words, you can plan your life and live your plan, or you can simply let the flow of life events and circumstances sweep you down the river of time taking you wherever it will. This is the quintessential example of “go with the flow.” The latter, sadly, is the way most people live their lives – by accident. The former is how God created us to live—on purpose.

You can see this planning ahead mindset in passages like Ephesians 5:15-16 where Paul says, “*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.*” Moses says it this way in Psalm 90:12, “*Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*”

Some might claim that there is something unspiritual about making plans, but for those of us who do make plans, we are in good company. God made plans. In Jeremiah 29:11 it says, “*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.*” (See also Hebrews 11:40a, Ephesians 1:11.) Paul made plans. In Romans 15:23-24 he states, “*I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain...*” (See also 2 Corinthians 1:15-17.) And we are encouraged to make plans. Proverbs 21:5 declares, “*Plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.*” (See also Proverbs 16:3, 20:18a)

Unfortunately, when it comes to building our financial “empires” (We call this kind of building “getting ahead”), we can often find ourselves doing so without any real divine purpose behind it.

Successful and disciplined people are able continue building up their “pile of stuff” because they have become exceedingly good at what they do. They also find great emotional enjoyment and personal satisfaction in building, so they keep on building without ever giving much thought to where it will end up or even knowing when they are done.

With this in mind, there is a foundational question that we, as believers, need to ask ourselves. We must ask, “*What is my purpose for continuing to accumulate more financial resources especially when my pile of stuff is already higher than I will ever need it to be?*” The key word here is need. In America the difference between needs and wants/comforts have become so blurred that our wants and comforts have morphed into needs causing us to consciously or unconsciously redefine what a need is.

Jesus tells us plainly that accumulating excess material possessions as a sole end in itself is entirely futile. Jesus poses it in the form of a question, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matthew 16:26). For those who make accumulating more because they can, could be likened to the rich farmer who planned to tear down his smaller barns and build bigger barns to hold his surplus wealth. Remember, Jesus called him a “fool.”

There is no greater example of the utter folly of building without a purpose than the story of Sarah Winchester. Sarah was the wife of William Winchester, the only son of Oliver Winchester, the founder and owner of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Sarah and William had a daughter who died shortly after birth in 1866. This was followed by the death of her father-in-law (in 1880) and then her husband just a few months later (in 1881), leaving her with a fifty percent ownership in the company and an income of \$1,000 a day (about \$21,000 a day in current dollars).

Sarah believed that her family was under some kind of a curse and consulted a medium to determine what she should do. The medium told her that her family was indeed cursed by the spirits of all the people that the Winchester rifle had killed. She should move out west and build a house for herself and all the tormented spirits who suffered because of her family. The medium also told her that if construction on this house were to ever cease, she would immediately die.

In 1884 Sarah moved to California and began one of the most bizarre building stories in American history. She began spending her \$20 million inheritance and regular income to buy and begin renovating an eight-room farmhouse in what is now San Jose, California. From that day forward construction continued nonstop, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week until Sarah’s death at age eighty-three—a total of thirty-eight years. She kept no less than twenty-two carpenters busy continuously. The sounds of hammers and saws could be heard throughout the day and night for almost four decades.

At its zenith, this seven story house contained 160 rooms, forty bedrooms, forty-seven fireplaces, seventeen chimneys, and 10,000 windowpanes. What made Sarah’s lifetime building project so bizarre was that it had no discernable architectural purpose or plan behind it. Closet doors opened to solid walls. Windows were in the floor. Stairways led to nowhere. Railings were installed upside down. Drawers were only one inch deep. Trapdoors were everywhere. Blind chimneys stopped short of the ceiling. There were double-back hallways. Doors opened to steep drops to the lawn below. Many of the bathrooms had glass doors. The list of oddities runs into the dozens. Could there be a more classic example of the ultimate outcome of “building without a purpose?”

We may think that what we are building is not bizarre like Sarah Winchester’s construction project. But the truth is that unless there is a divine purpose behind why we are doing what we are doing, God may actually find our building project just as meaningless and bizarre as the Sarah Winchester Mystery House. Paul addresses this very issue in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 when he says: *Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,*

each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

This is the question you need to ask, "What foundation am I building on? What materials am I building with? And why am I building what I am building?"

I think John Wesley had it right when he said, "Gain all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can." If we adhere to this compelling "financial triad" as we labor on our building projects, we will be building on a solid foundation utilizing building materials of heavenly "gold, silver, and precious stones." And in our building efforts we will discover that we are indeed living life on purpose.

STUDY GUIDE & QUESTIONS

1. What is your initial reaction to the message of this lesson?

2. Share your thoughts on whether it is a lack of faith to make plans for the future?

- Read about purpose: Ephesians 5:15-16, Psalm 90:12
- Read about God making plans: Hebrews 11:40a, Jeremiah 29:11, Ephesians 1:11
- Read about Paul making plans: 2 Corinthians 1:15-17, Romans 15:24
- Read about people making plans: Proverbs 16:3, 20:18, 21:5

3. In what ways do you think it might be wrong to make plans for the future? Read James 4:13-17 and compare the above verses with this passage. Why is making plans considered right in some places and then wrong in others?

4. Do you consider yourself rich? Who are you comparing yourself to? Why must we be very careful about failing to recognize just how rich we are? Will knowing your income compared to the rest of the world's income change your current lifestyle, attitudes and/or behavior? If so, how? If not, why not?

5. Read 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 and discuss what kinds of materials might be categorized as the "heavenly materials" that we should be building with.

6. What do you think of John Wesley's statement, "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can"? How might this way of thinking change the way you are currently working, handling money and giving?

7. What is your assessment of what Sarah Winchester spent her life and her vast fortune to build? (is it important to keep in mind that it was all built of the highest quality materials by hundreds of highly skilled craftsmen?)

8. What do you understand your unique God-given purpose to be? Why has God put you on this planet – at just this time in history and in just this place – America (and not the slums of Calcutta or the rural bush in Africa)? What are you here for?

9. How is what you are currently doing with your time, your talents and your treasures helping you to fulfill your unique life-purpose?

10. If you continue on the course your life is headed now, will you be happy with what you have spent your life “building?”

11. What is going to change in your life because of what you have learned in this lesson? What are you going to start doing differently?